

THE WASHINGTON POST

8 March 1983

U.S. Considers Selling Parts of Weather Service To Private Side

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The Reagan administration is considering selling parts of the nation's weather service to private companies.

A Cabinet recommendation to take the first step by selling the nation's land, ocean, and weather satellites is already on President Reagan's desk, John V. Byrne, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said yesterday.

The Cabinet Council on Commerce and Trade, chaired by Secretary of Commerce Malcolm Baldrige, in December recom-

mended asking the Department of Commerce to oversee the transfer of the civil operational weather, land, and future ocean satellites to the U.S. domestic private sector as soon as possible," according to minutes of the Dec. 15 council meeting.

At the same time, NOAA is reviewing the operation of the National Weather Service and other parts of the agency—including weather monitoring stations all over the United States, and weather analysis and forecasting operations—to decide what part of the services also can be turned over to private companies by sale or contract.

Though land-viewing satellites were long expected to become commercial enterprises, the move to "privatize" weather satellites and parts of the national weather service could fundamentally change century-old international agreements for free sharing of weather data among 100 nations of the world.

Proposals to "commercialize" parts of the nation's weather service have caused concern among other nations as well as weather scientists in this country. They and the news media now receive weather data and satellite photographs without cost and de-

pend on them for storm warnings and other information.

Rep. James H. Scheuer (D-N.Y.) has asked the General Accounting Office to study whether such a sale can take place without the consent of Congress. In any case, Byrne has said in writing that no action would be taken without congressional approval.

The chief rationale for selling the weather and land-viewing satellites, one former NOAA official said, is that the United

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States is quickly falling behind other nations in the commercial exploitation of satellites for agriculture and mineral and oil exploration. France and Japan both are planning to launch commercial satellites to take and sell land pictures. Neither has announced any interest in operating commercial weather satellites.

One university scientist said selling the weather satellite system to a private company could harm the work of professional weather researchers and reduce the quality of data gathered if profit becomes the primary motive. "The whole system could be permanently disabled," he said.

Another scientist, Robert Fleagle, a pro-

fessor of atmospheric sciences at the University of Washington, said selling of the satellites appears to be only one part of the commercialization of many parts of NOAA that "could come down, to dismantling a good portion of the country's weather services."

Since weather monitoring, data analysis and forecasting require a large, well-coordinated organization, he said, "A lack of a government infrastructure would really be a serious thing. A commercial outfit, itself would just not have the raw material to work with."

A Canadian official said his government also was "very concerned" about the satellites being sold to private companies. Noting that the U.S. government already sells

non-weather satellite data, he said, "We have a satellite looking down at our country and we don't call it a spy satellite because we have non-discriminatory access to it. . . . But if we were charged 100 times as much by some company, then we might begin to wonder about this."

"Meteorological data has traditionally been free," he added. "Everything that a country gathers is thrown into the pot to make the world weather system work."

Because of its large land masses, Canada spends five times as much as the United States per capita on weather monitoring, with much of the Canadian data becoming part of the daily weather forecast for parts of the United States.

Scheuer said that Congress would have

to take "a long and careful look" at any Reagan administration proposal.

"The only serious proposal so far [from the commercial satellite firm Comsat] could cost the government well over \$300 million per year [in subsidies], and that may be significantly more than the government now pays for these services, or to provide these data," Scheuer said.

Of the approximately 12,000 employees at NOAA, the jobs of 3,500 will be reviewed for "commercializing," according to NOAA official William J. Coleman. That figure does not count the possible satellite sale. By one Congressional estimate, 40 percent of the entire agency may be considered for "commercializing."

Byrne said that the White House has not

made a decision on selling the satellites or parts of the weather service. But he said the proposed changes are all "geared to a leaner, harder, more efficient operation" of the government.

"I don't think there is any question that in the future we are not going to continue doing business as we have in the past," he said. "The changes are more significant than they have been in the past. When you look at the federal deficit, you can see we've got to do something."

He said service agencies have to be considered candidates to be turned over to commercial hands.

"In some cases someone ought to be able to make a profit on some of these things," Byrne said.